

## A Look Back: Easter Island in 1967

Reed Mulkey

An American airman landed at Rapa Nui in April of 1967. Lt. Colonel Reed C. Mulkey, Commander of the 55th Aerospace Rescue and Recover Squadron at Kindley AFB, Bermuda, was impressed by what he saw and wrote the following letter to his family. Our thanks to Reed for sharing this peek into life on Rapa Nui, thirty years ago.

Dear Family: I have just returned from a most exciting venture south of the equator. As I may have told you, the airplane I fly has the capability to pick up people or packages from the ground while we are in flight, and we can recover them into the airplane. It is not done by magic but rather by a balloon with a long and very strong line beneath it, which is attached securely to the package to be picked up. We fly under the balloon at about 400 feet and a device in the nose of the airplane catches the rope, breaking the balloon free and lifting the "package" off the ground. People in the rear of the airplane catch the line as it trails behind the plane and tie it down to the ramp; the line is released from the nose of the airplane and the loose end then retrieved at the rear. This line is put on a winch and the package reeled into the airplane.

There is a small Air Force group on Easter Island which is way down south . . . and out on the Pacific Ocean about 2000 miles west of Santiago, Chile. And for the last several months, rescue aircraft have been flying out to the island and dropping mail by parachute and picking up the out-going mail with our super-duper picker-upper. The poor guys on Easter Island don't see a ship but about once every six months so we are their only source of letters from home.

I decided that I would take the trip in April. So we gathered our balloons and droppable helium bottles and parachutes and flew to Panama where we were to pick up the mail. When we got there, they asked us if we knew that we were supposed to land at Easter Island this time, and of course we didn't, nor did our headquarters nor the people above them. Only the Pentagon knew and they never write. So many telephone calls later . . . we were told to go ahead. We picked up the mail and nine tons of freight (the real reason for landing rather than air dropping) and took off for Chile. At Santiago, the Chilean Air Force piled on more freight (the Chileans own Easter and have a teenie weenie Air Force detachment there too) and several people, including a Colonel Valter Heitmann who should have flown for the Luftwaffe from the way he looked, but was a natural-born Chilean, one of the many Germans who settled in Chile hundreds of years ago. We were briefed on the little runway that had been constructed on Easter from crushed volcanic rock. I will admit it was pretty small; ninety feet wide is okay for a highway but not quite wide enough to turn a C-130 about.

After many delays waiting for freight and messages and people, we finally took off at three o'clock on the morning of 20 April. It is 2030 nautical miles from Santiago to Mataverí (Easter's airport) and except for two deserted islands, there is nothing enroute but salt water. The flight took eight hours and just after daybreak. . . we picked up the island on radar. It finally came into view after we descended through the clouds.

From the air it is a lush green with several large hills dominating the terrain. As we flew low around the island we could see large flocks of sheep, some cattle and, of course, the huge statues that Easter is so famous for. I flew down the runway to check on its size, then turned around and landed with a clatter since I was trying to get the bird stopped in as short a distance as possible. We used up only a third of their very short runway, thanks to the short field performance of the C-130 and the fact that the runway is built rising up a hill.

I might mention that all the way down the final approach we were advised that the runway was clear of animals. This didn't mean much to me until after we landed and I found out that there are more sheep, dogs, and horses than there are people. On both sides of the runway as we landed were "cowboys" on horseback whose job it was to keep the animals



Reed Mulkey at Rano Raraku, 20 April 1967

off the runway.

We were greeted by everybody who was anybody: the governor, the Chilean Air Force Commander, the US Air Force *en toto* because they wanted their mail, and many natives. We were the fourth airplane ever to land on Easter Island and therefore were somewhat of a curiosity.

We were taken to our quarters which were excellent. Trailer houses without wheels with hot water and showers and all the conveniences of home. They fed us a magnificent breakfast and pummeled us with questions and we went to bed. Lunch was at noon and again they put on a feast of spaghetti and meatballs, and lobster tails. Lobster is so plentiful that they only have to wade out in shallow water at night and pick them off the bottom. But a Dr Johnloz, an Air Force doctor at Easter, has taught them to make lobster traps and they are now bringing in 42 lobsters in a trap.

Unfortunately it rained like wild all the time we were on the island but we did take a quickie tour of the island during the afternoon. We visited the area in which most of the statues are located, the side of the volcano [Rano Raraku]. They truly are magnificent. Some must run forty feet in height (or length since most of them are lying on their large noses). They weigh some 25 tons, we were told. Where they came from we shall leave to Thor Heyerdahl and Father Sebastian and the other historians. The race that carved them disappeared . . . and it is assumed they were overthrown by forces from off the island. Although most of the statues are near the lava quarry, many have been transported five miles from the quarry. This raises a question as to how they moved them. At the time of the long ears there were no animals on the island and it had to be done by sheer manpower. Some of the statues were moved from the quarry on the side of the volcano up two hundred or more feet and down inside the volcano. The people must have been dedicated to the point of fanaticism.

Though the telling is short, the trip was long and wet and we slid through mud that taxed our four-wheel drive vehicles. We arrived back in camp at supper time and dined with the governor and his wife and the Chilean commandante and his wife. These were the only white women on the island. The natives appear to be Polynesian. Very tall, many men over six feet, light-skinned and handsome. They speak a combination of Spanish, their native tongue, and bartering English. We tried to buy wooden carvings of the statues and I was able to get two small ones . . . Unfortunately, the third airplane that landed on the island had come there in March and it was a tourist-scientific flight. Those 'ricos' ruined all the prices. Prior to their arrival, the natives would trade a large carving for a carton of cigarettes or a pair of pants. Now they ask \$50. They have no need for money as the only store on the island is a commissary run by the Chilean government. They have very little for sale there, and the natives make most of their own goods. If we had known that we were going to the island we could have brought trade good, fishing lines, hooks and nets, and lots of pants. They seemed intrigued with trousers and equate \$50 to three pairs of chinos. I doubt, however, that I will ever get back.

We left at daybreak on the 21st in order to get back to Santiago before dark. Santiago lies in a nest among the foothills of the Andes and we did not want to risk running into a mountain in the dark.

When we arrived at the airplane for takeoff, the crew chief showed me the door of the airplane. During the night someone had painted a picture of the head of one of the statues on the door and labeled the airplane "Rapa Nui No. 1". There was much sadness and waving as we left. I wish we could have stayed another day or two but we had to get back to Bermuda. We took another group of passengers back with us. One was a mental case, an American who had flipped. He was under sedation and was no problem at all. Poor kid had taken up with a native girl, had gone to live with her in her cave—and we took him away from all that.

Our trip back was a blur. We would fly ten hours, land, go to bed, get up and fly again until time became confused. We arrived back in Bermuda Sunday evening, completely bushed but with a little more of the world under our belts.

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

### France

Paul Bahn has alerted us to another *moai* "sighting," this time in Paris.



Three small *moai* were erected earlier this year in the gardens of the Natural History Museum, Paris. These apparently are temporary, in association with an exhibition called "Islands" (Photo: Paul G. Bahn).

## WHAT'S NEW IN POLYNESIA

### Fiji

In response to a need by the Fiji Museum and government to increase awareness of the importance of cultural heritage issues in the Pacific, a new course has been developed by the Sociology Department of the University of the South Pacific. The course, concerning Pacific Island Archaeology, will develop expertise in order to protect archaeological resources. The course will be innovative as it would link USP with the Fiji museum, with a focus on the Peopling of the Pacific. The course is not aimed at producing archaeologists but is for the dissemination of information to increase understanding and awareness. As part of the course, a field trip to Beqa Island in Fiji was made, under the direction of Geoff Clark and Athol Anderson of the Australian National University. Beqa Island provides evidence for use as a fishing camp for over 3,000 years.

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### HAWAII

Samuel H. Elbert, Professor Emeritus of Pacific Languages and Linguistics, University of Hawai'i, died on 13 May, three months before his 90th birthday. Sam will be remembered mainly for his *Hawaiian Dictionary* (with Mary Pukui, 1971) and his *Place Names of Hawaii* (with Pukui and others, 1966). He also worked on the Polynesian outliers of Rennell and Bellona.

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